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'Phantom' on film is just a knockoff

By JEFF SIMON
News Critic

And now a brief commercial for poor benighted Gaston Leroux . . .

The Encyclopedia Britannica never heard of him. Neither did Compton's Encyclopedia, Grigson's Encyclopedia of Modern World Literature, the Universal Family Encyclopedia or the Random House Unexpurgated Dictionary, among a vast corridor of reference tomes to avoid the subject.

REVIEW

The Phantom of the Opera

Gaston Leroux's maniac prowls again.

Starring Robert Englund. Directed by Dwight H. Little.

Rated R, playing at the Market Arcade, Boulevard Mall and Hoyts Walden Galleria theaters.

So who is Gaston Leroux and why should anyone give a rat's tail?

Well, long before Andrew Lloyd Webber turned "The Phantom of the Opera" into a gargantuan musical with the largest advance sales in theatrical history; long before Lon Chaney, Claude Rains, Herbert Lom and Maximilian Schell snarled and skulked their way through movie versions; and long before Brian DePalma had his antic way with the story in his movie "The Phantom of the Paradise," there was only the fevered, rococo imagination of Gaston Leroux.

"The Phantom of the Opera" is his yarn. No one in his right mind would have dreamed that a multitude of adaptations would turn Leroux's gaslight fantasy about ambition and horror in the Paris Opera into one of the most enduring tales of the century. But so they have.

It's a wild and nuttily rhapsodic novel — a mare's nest of tales within tales and crazed exclamation points.

The new, cheap knockoff movie version of Leroux's "Phantom of the Opera" takes it from the Paris Opera across town to the Grand Guignol, the fabled Parisian theater specializing in guts and gore and audiences with queasy stomachs.

For plot purposes, it has been transferred from Paris to London, which isn't the same thing at all (Garnier's Paris Opera is a building that has to be seen to be believed). But the Phantom is played by Robert Englund, better known to millions of japing teens, subteens and post-teens as Freddy Krueger, the Nightmare on Elm Street.

Englund is a very strange actor to have become a horror idol — a tiny man with a very soft voice and cultivated elocution.

Taking this role seems to be Englund's way of telling the world that he's the Lon Chaney of contemporary garbage cinema. Well, maybe he is. Far be it from me to thwart a man's ambitions.

Once again, composer Eric Desler prowls the cellars and pits of the opera, furthering the career of his beautiful young protegee with well-timed carnage.

Robert Englund isn't on Elm Street this time.

The slaughter at hand in this one includes a stagehand who's skinned alive and stuffed into the diva's armoire; the diva herself, who winds up in the soup (literally), and assorted ruffians and coppers who are beheaded under extremely strenuous circumstances.

Misha Segal's music rips off Lloyd Webber's dotted rhythms, but to no avail. This is the kind of movie where the Phantom goes to costume balls dressed as Death (always a cutup) and most of the blood looks like Kool-Aid.

When the Phantom prowls through the Whitechapel slums, he is beset by hookers who ask, "Good evening, guvnor, what's your desire tonight?" "Desire," snarls the Phantom in response, "what do you know of desire?"

You know — that kind of movie (the kind where turn-of-the-century types have hair that is well-moussed and blown dry.)

"Amiably awful" pretty well covers it.

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